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ABSTRACT

A conference on academic library services to disabled students is summarized. Presentations which focused on the global context of library services and the information role of library personnel, the need to develop qualitative and quantitative standards dealing with technical as well as service aspects, the growing body of information resources on library services for disabled students, the importance of bibliographic instruction for disabled students, the need for user involvement, the importance of taped materials, and the advent of new equipment are noted. It is suggested that campus experiences underline the need for awareness, student input, staff training, and cooperation among departments and faculty members. (CL)

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Academic Library Services to Disabled Students Conference
May 6-7, 1983

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CONFERENCE SUMMARY

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Since I am not working in an academic library, I have, during this conference, been taking the view of an interested and sympathetic outsider, and I would like to share with you by way of summary what I have perceived from the different presentations.

Clearly, there is need for improving academic library services to disabled persons. The number of disabled students is growing as a result of more younger people reaching college age and of more campuses providing better access to persons with disabilities. While this conference has heard various problems that exist with academic library services, it has also heard solutions, and I sense a spirit of optimism, of "can do," about what must be done.

Global Context

Dr. Stone set the tone of the conference in her opening remarks by helping us see this issue in a global context. She pointed out that upwards of 25 percent of the world's population is affected by disabilities, either directly or indirectly, and she reminded us of the United Nations' recognition of disabled persons by its International Year of the Disabled and now by chartering the Decade of Disabled Persons. As a result of these actions, we may see various national efforts taking place.

Dr. Stone described targets for library service, based upon the U.N. Charter for the Decade, in the areas of prevention, services, involvement, and awareness, and she suggested specific targets for academic libraries.

She also asked us to remember that libraries and librarians are prime sources of information, first, to dispel myths about disabilities and, second, to help disabled persons with information for work, recreation and understanding of their own disabilities.

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Finally, Dr. Stone said that despite the poor economic condition of many libraries, we must take a positive view of the potential we have to accomplish better library services for disabled users.

Standards

Al Trezza brought out the need for standards of two types: qualitative and quantitative. These standards must deal with both the technical aspects of librarianship and with the service aspects. He pointed out that standards are sometimes difficult to develop because they must balance ideal and reality, and we recall his statement that standards must be "realistic, achievable, and implementable."

He told of the revision of standards now underway for NLS network libraries and described how that revision was part of a deliverate and planned process that insures updating. In describing this process, he showed how it might apply to academic libraries that want to develop their own standards.

He further said that, ultimately, standards must reflect user needs, they must be put into practice, and they must be measured. Above all, standards are not ends in themselves; they are means to the goal of better library service.

Information Resources

Both from the paper by Jim Thomas and from a discussion group, we heard about the varied and growing number of information resources concerning library service to disabled persons: directories, monograph,s periodicals, data bases, clearinghouses, and other resources. Academic librarians need to be aware of many of these.

Librarians also need to recognize that in their collection development plans that relate to disabilities, they need to include information on disabilities themselves, on access, travel, materials for relatives of those with disabilities, for newly disabled persons, and on advocacy and consumer issues.

We identified that there are gaps and limitations in the information sources in such matters as information for the impaired elderly, staff training of librarians, and in having materials on librarianship in special formats to encourage disabled persons who wish to enter the library profession.

Bibliographic Instruction

Marsha Broadway in her presentation and one of the discussion

groups brought out that the lack of bibliographic instruction or improper bibliographic instruction can be another "barrier" to the use of academic libraries by disabled students. Most disabled students, as with students generally, know little about how to use a library, so if bibliographic instruction is provided at all, it should be provided for disabled students as well as others.

Such instruction can be done in various ways: regular classes, orientation tours, special times for disabled students, using handouts, etc., but to be effective, bibliographic instruction takes careful planning and the support of the library administration. Above all, we must recognize that bibliographic instruction is an essential first step to orienting disabled students to a library.

User Involvement

The survey done here at FSU is one example of a step toward getting greater disabled user involvement with the academic library, and is the sort of thing that any university library could do. The FSU survey highlighted some of the problems of locating and interviewing disabled students, but the lesson of this survey is that disabled students are aware of specific problems and needs relating to academic library services. Therefore, disabled students are good sources for librarians in planning for better services. In short, get user involvement.

Recording for the Blind

The presentation by Anne Parkison showed the growing need for and use of taped materials by students at all levels. I think librarians should see RFB as an information resource and as a place to which to refer students who need recorded materials.

Her description of the task of automating the catalog illustrated some of the problems involved in such an effort. The first problem, as affecting the library, was that a librarian was not involved until the project was well underway. Therefore, if any automation is to affect your library operations, be sure that you are involved early.

The RFB conversion also illustrates the importance of

close coordination in a complex task. It well demonstrated Murphy's Second Law: "Everything takes longer than you think it will." Let's hope their file will soon be up and running.

New Equipment

We've been fortunate to see demonstrations of some equipment that is available to help disabled persons. This is another area in which librarians need to be knowledgeable and that can be a challenge because new items are always being developed and old ones are being improved. You could see from some of the sales representatives' comments that some of these things were so new that they hardly were familiar with them. This emphasizes Samuel Huang's comment that you must do careful research of user needs before buying any equipment.

The demonstrations, and the problems that some of the representatives had, also illustrated that technical problems are still with us. There are bugs that haven't been worked out. This says to me that librarians must try to evaluate equipment for its usefulness, durability and servicing. They must also be prepared to help disabled users in the library who may encounter problems when operating the equipment.

The high cost of some of these items is still a problem but I hope that, with improvement in microelectronics, we'll see cost reductions such as have happened with calculators and small computers.

We can also appreciate some of the new things that are being developed such as the voice indexing that Pat Jahoda demonstrated. Here is an example of developing technology that allows visually impaired persons to help themselves and offers potential for teaching them various skills.

Case Studies

We heard descriptions of specific programs at the University of Connecticut, at Southern Illinois University, Northern Illinois University, and at the University of California at Berkely. I see several points in common among these various campus situations that relate to academic libraries:

1. Awareness is the beginning of better service. Awareness

by librarians and library directors of the needs and the possible solutions to better library service for disabled students. Handicapped Awareness Weeks are just one example. Facility surveys to identify problem areas are another. And let's all become members of Betty-Ruth's "AA."

2. Lack of funds is a common problem, but as Barbara Lott said, "Let's figure out a way to get it." I think we were all impressed with Samuel Huang's comments and how he well illustrated the potential of non-university sources for funding for equipment for disabled users. And as Betty-Ruth showed with her blocks under the legs of tables to raise their height for wheelchairs, not every adaptation is expensive.

3. Student input is essential. Use surveys and interviews to ask disabled students for recommendations and suggestions on how to improve library services.

4. Be open to serving the non-university users. This will depend upon your particular situation but if you can serve patrons from the general community, you may have a better chance of raising funds from the community. Just look at the University of Connecticut and Northern Illinois University.

5. Staff training is important. To quote Betty-Ruth, "The first step in better service to disabled students is to educate the library staff." This can be done through workshops, as Peter Pomerantz and Sam Huang have described, or with audio-visuals, as we have seen today. Do one at your school.

6. Cooperate with other campus offices. This cooperation varies among campuses; UC/Berkeley is apparently very good at this. It's important to get this cooperation so that you can be most effective in serving disabled students.

7. The support of top administration is critical. The extent of support among these universities varied but it's critical if you are going to have a permanent program to serve disabled students.

Problems & Solutions

The problems that have been discussed this weekend have been familiar ones. Little attention is given in library schools to library service to the disabled. Most libraries lack funds.

Librarians are often unaware of the resources that are available or are untrained to serve disabled students. Sometimes there are unsympathetic library or university administrators.

But I think the problems are as much matters of attitude and communication as they are of funding or special formats or building access.

Changing attitudes is a hard area and requires commitment to change. There is great need for good training resources for this. Note the very positive reaction to Shelley's videotape, and how the discussion focused on its potential use in other settings. That said to me that here was a valuable tool for dealing with attitudes.

But the solutions to all of these problems lie in action. And action requires awareness, commitment, and creativity. (Action= Awareness + Commitment + Creativity) Awareness of (1) the problems,(2) the information resources that are available, and (3) of what others have done and are doing. Commitment to improve our services. Creative Thought to find ways to do this. This conference has shown us some of those ways.

Observations

In closing let me make some miscellaneous observations:

* Awareness sensitizes our observation of access and service problems. I believe this conference has raised your awareness level and you'll observe more about your libraries when you return.

* Users are individuals and disabled users are individuals and should be dealt with as such.

* Good service to disabled patrons involves the university library more with the rest of the campus than almost any of its other activities. There's more coordination with other offices, and sharing of information and resources; therefore, it's an important public relations aspect of the library and should be given proper attention.

* Librarians who serve disabled patrons need to know more about certain specific things: legislation that affects disabled patrons, their employment rights, the influence of personal attitudes on service, communication skills, current awareness of information and technology concerning disabilities.

* There's never enough money so you must be creative to effectively serve disabled patrons. As Al Trezza said, don't let lack of money become an excuse for inaction.

Dr. Stone, in her opening remarks, expressed the hope that the conference would result in action. We've heard problems but we'heard solutions or ways of thinking toward solutions. Much can be done. You can't do everything but you can do something. I hope you will commit yourself as you leave this conference to doing just one thing, making one change, or telling one other library professional what you've learned here. It may not seem like much but there is something that you can apply to your library.

The Chinese have a proverb: A journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step. Take that step. Make that one change and you, your library and your patrons will all benefit.